**Chapter 5**

**Still with a Western Eye: The Displacement Experience of Women in Refugee Camps and the Necessity to Shift Perspective**

**Dispalcement – an introduction**

Displacement - a word whose translation refers to people, to human beings, men and women. Displacement - the condition of those who are forced to leave their home and find shelter and protection elsewhere. Displacement is a violent practice[[1]](#footnote-1). The only thing that matters is that in displacement you are supposed to be safe. How long you are supposed to remain in this condition is not known. Suddenly you leave, with no information regarding your return; you are pushed into a limbo. Reconstructing your house and your domestic affections in this temporary shelter, does not seem to be a primary need at the beginning. Your basic needs are provided. The memories you have of your past seem to be enough to nurture the idea that, one day or another, a “return” will happen. Day by day, however, reorganizing your thoughts around something called "home" becomes a necessity. When the contours are lost in the limestone, when you no longer remember the beginning and the end goes away, when children are born and grown in the camp and they call the tent their “home” : this is the very moment when changing the perspective becomes a necessity. In the Syrian case, which is the objective of this research- according to the Norwegian Refugee Council operating at present on the field, more than 13 million people have faced one or more internal displacements since the beginning of the conflict. More than 6,5 million of Syrians have fled the country and are now living as refugees in foreign States, the majority of which in the neighbour countries. (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019). The UNHCR reports that at the end of 2019, the number of the Syrian refugees within the neighbour states are as follows:

* + - Turkey hosts 3,680,603 registered Syrian refugees
		- Lebanon hosts 919,578 registered Syrian refugees
		- Jordan hots 654,955 registered Syrian refugees
		- Iraq hosts 229,285 registered Syrian refugees
		- Egypt hosts 129,779 registered Syrian refugees[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this context, a more specific target of the research will be on the challenges and difficulties that Syrian refugee women encounter in being in displacement in one of the largest settlements ever conceived, the Zaatari camp in Jourdan, also known as "the instant city", the largest of the whole country (Ledwith, 2014).

**Framing the pre-conflict society: the plague of the gender based violence**

Before the war, Syrian women were subject to multiple discrimination in their communities, both inside and outside the walls of their houses (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). While on one hand the Constitution has given equal rights to all citizens and Syria has ratified the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) in 2003 (although with important reservations); on the other, it is clear that these commitments have not been incorporated into the national legislation. The country, before the conflict, had a mixed legal system, including both secular and religious courts. The *sharia* has been applied in matters related to the personal status of the citizens, thus allowing religious minorities to apply their own laws, in many cases strongly discriminating against women who are assigned a lower status -for example in case of marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody- (OECD, 2014). In November 2011, a joint study by the Syrian government and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported that one out of three women suffered domestic violence in Syria. Nevertheless, fewer sanctions have been prescribed for men in the event of homicide and other violent crimes committed against women, considering the defense of the family honor a mitigating factor (Amnesty International, 2011).

Aubone and Hernandez consider the condition of women in society in the pre-conflict period as a strong indicator of the probability of rape in war (Aubone and Hernandez 2013). If within their culture and traditions men see their role as the only head of the family and the only protector of its female members, under the condition of refugee this perception dramatically changes: men do not have an occupation and at the same time assume no of domestic or welfare functions, so that their status as a reference point for the sustenance of the community is lost. This involves refugee men having to deal with the feeling of impotence and boredom, with a strong lowering of their self-esteem and a consequent rise in frustration: all sensations that can easily degenerate into acts of violence, not infrequently addressed towards their own family (Boswell and Al-Akash, 2013).

Furthermore, the cultural norms of some hosting countries, such as Jordan for example, contribute to affecting Syrian women in refugee camps: the negative connotations associated with "seeking help" contribute to give a bad reputation to refugee women and can lead to silence on sexual violence. In a 2013 a quantitative study measured the attitude of Jordanian citizens towards violence against women: Al-Matalka and Hussainat reported that the current culture in Jordan accepts the use of violence against women as a kind of discipline and any intervention by officials and organizations in favor of the victim would cause bad reputation to the family (Al-Matalka and Hussainat 2013).

According to Ferris (2007), even after the escape from the conflict and the search for a shelter in a camp, the smallest traditional social norm aimed at protecting women may diminish, causing an increased risk of violence on the part of partners within the community.

The social stigma associated with sexual and gender-based violence creates a double victimization and a double trauma for women: they might survive sexual violence at home, but not the social stigma outside, in society. Humanitarian agencies and organizations that manage the life of the refugees in the camps face significant challenges regarding the failure to report violence, due to cultural constraints, but also due to the isolation of the victims, which contributes at creating obstacles to a real knowledge of the problem. In a 2013 study conducted by the United Nations on sexual violence in Jordan, an alarming 83% of participants were not aware of any services available within the camp in which they were hosted (UNHCR, 2013).

**Changing Viewpoints, Setting New Priorities**

It is universally recognized that the built environment, the artefacts and their forms, their use and their meanings, play a fundamental role in the construction (or in the deconstruction) of hierarchies and social roles among sexes in the society. Under a condition of forced relocation in a camp, conceived as a place for a temporary transit, people arrive in sudden waves, without any type of planning and, inside the camp, they tend necessarily to group, in order to reconstruct the sense of their communities. In this situation of true emergency, it is of fundamental importance to consider the interaction between the built environment and the social behavior of the inhabitants. This extreme precariousness and nebulosity of the condition of "refugee" people is one of the consequences of the fact that the host countries have always shown a strong will to give "refugeeism" a transitory nature. Jourdan, as well as Lebanon, therefore, must not be conceived as a final destination, but as an intermediate location among which the asylum seekers must pass in order to find settlement in another state (Janmyr,2017, 2018). In this scenario, it is quite impossible to have a clear vision of the issue, while having a clear knowledge of the refugees’ cultural background would be an absolute necessity, together with a strong capacity to listen carefully to their stories, to study how they interact and how they use the public space according to the patriarchal rules stratified in their culture. A lack of apparently minimal information that affects not only the international organizations, but also -and above all- those operators who have the duty to manage the daily life of the people in the refugee camp day after day. However, how is it possible to control these types of interactions in an emergency context, where the priority is just saving lives, given the fact that even in our contemporary cities the institutions are not used to giving attention to their citizens as individuals, according to their different needs? How are they supposed to succeed in a refugee camp? In order to find the answers to these questions, it is important to look into the ways in which in a temporary settlement, that basically start from the scratch and does not have an urban history to preserve, it is relatively easier to experiment some simple and useful urban planning solutions that can be “life-saving" and already serve to promote inclusion and equality. In this scenario, an urban planning perspective capable of taking into account the different impact that policies and measures can have on women and men, appears indispensable. The research highlights how even the tiniest detail of everyday life can be fundamental to determine the death or the survival of women and girls under these conditions of forced cohabitation, and restriction in one sense, as well as in facing the new and unthinkable possibilities of accessing the public space given by the new settlement. A partial list of issues to take into consideration may include:

* Attention to the spatial positioning of the dwellings: not only through the practice of zoning as a method of urban planning (Wolf, 2008), but also taking into consideration where the assigned accommodations are located relative to one another: all in a long row, giving to the camp an "authoritarian" appearance (Ledwith 2014) or forming a circle, favoring in this way the spirit of the community
* Attention to the arrangement and the organization of the basic services: where to put a water supply, a food distribution point, schools, health services, shops, etc…
* Attention to the timetables and to the routes of the public transports: essential for accessing the services mentioned above and for a safe housing in the camp.

The care for these details, considered at the margin of a picture whose center is the quick removal of people from a battlefield, can concretely save the lives of women and girls a second time. In the logistic organization of a refugee camp, the gender perspective stands as a transformative issue, something that in our cities, already built and historically preserved, is not so clear and evident: the position in the urban environment of the food market, the school or of the hospital; the housing settlement placed according to a certain logic rather than another; a light along the street, or a schedule of the public services designed to not let people wait long. All these urban details can make the difference between freedom and fear and between life and death, foremost of the women in a camp (Davis and Taylor, 2013; Boswall and Al Akash, 2015). Moreover, focusing the attention on other apparently small issues, such as the preservation of particular rituals and of domestic habits when possible; the repositioning of small forms of urban furniture (a tree, a fountain, a votive sign...), takes on a particular meaning, which can be relevant in maintaining the perspective of the future life outside the camp. special attention to small details in urban planning cannot represent the solution to all problems: living in a refugee camp, both formal or informal, in the country of origin or elsewhere, frames a situation where freedom, health and safety are inevitably challenged every day. Women and men have fled their homes in search of a safer place to live, hoping to escape the physical violence that always accompanies a war, but what really happened is that the violence followed them in their new forced accommodation (CARE, 2014).

Considering that the female refugee experience differs from male one because women and girls, in addition to facing general insecurity, also face the heightened threat of violence (“they are overwhelmed by the violence and risks of violence they encounter nearly everywhere they go*”*, Rosenberg, 2016, 15), having a safe and independent access to water supplies, food distribution and services, to transports, education facilities and to the possibility to meet the chance to find at least a job, can favor their self-determination and independence (Abuzeid, 2013; WRC, 2014). These issues, up until then, had been the missed goal in their culture of origin, especially if their origin is rural, if they come from the margins of big cities, from areas in which traditional and patriarchal social practices are rooted most. However, are the Westerners -the supposed *helpers*- aware of the consequences of this new positioning of women in the public space of the camp, completely at the opposite of the close and traditional family context in which Syrian women usually live? A simple and neutral action like placing a water supply in a certain point of the camp, turns out to be full of implications: if the urban frame changes for women due to the NGO’s projects and efforts, but the traditional scheme of the domestic relationships around them is maintained in the patriarchal frame, the risk of rape and violence for women and girls in the new condition of freedom, may only increase. For this reason, men should not be taken away from the picture (Hahn and Inhorn, 2009; WRC, 2014), since addressing only women in humanitarian interventions may not impact women’s daily-life environment. Changes in women’s life experience towards gender equality and violence protection will not only happen on their individual life level but in relationship with their partner, family, community and systems of culture, social norms and law; therefore to empower women it’s of utmost importance to enable the sociocultural and legal environment. In the context of a refugee camp, while women have to take on greater income-generating roles during displacement, this can be seen as a threat to men’s identities[[3]](#footnote-3). The transformation in the gender dynamics in the camp do trigger the hyper masculine associated codes of behaviour and, in order to re-establish the old scheme, violence is often the mean, directed toward women and children, continuing that cycle of abuse often experienced by them well before the displacement. However, at the same time, some men were forced to take greater caregiving roles, suggesting a pathway to change in gender relations. Whether such changes are long term, or just temporary connected with the displacement context, is still unclear.

**Excluding Men from Knowledge: Creating or Solving a Problem?**

The framework of the women refugees as victims in perennial need of protection and without agency finds most of its roots not in the reality, but rather in the "old" colonial discourse (Mohanty 1984), which has not ceased to exist and to inform the actions of most of the Western international institutions in response to critical situations of the "East" of the world. As Mohanty wrote in 2012, the discourse on the so-called “Third World women” is still colonized and depicted using "the eyes of the West" (Mohanty 2012). The fact, for example, that knowledge about rights is addressed from the NGOs running and acting in the camps as a positive action offered only to women, is a concept born in the West, where it has worked and is still working for decades (Jabbar and Zaza, 2016). However, when the context, culture, social roles and expectation of a society are different, the features of the patriarchy can also be different, and of this diversity we must be aware while tailoring our western practices. This is why the eye must be deeply situated in the hosting culture, in order to understand that excluding men from knowledge will contribute to perpetuate the domestic patriarchal and violent environment in which most of the women have always lived in the past, especially in the context of the poorest areas of Syria, from which most of the Zaatari’s refugees use to come. Among them, the male part of society appears to be not always ready to face and understand the changes that might take place in women's lives, due to the compliance with new rules in the camp. Excluded from the participation in most of the activities related to the empowerment that are instead provided to women, men seem to be the weak ring in the supporting chain for refugees, not just in Zaatari, but in all the settlements of this type (Eidmouni, 2017).

**In the city of Zaatari: the numbers**

It seems important, at this point of the research, to provide some data and a brief description of the urban camp of Zaatari. The first settlement, established on July 28, 2012, extended over two miles and was located in the northern part of Jordan in the Mafraq desert, subject to harsh winters, very hot summers and frequent sandstorms. Initially it was designed to accommodate 5,000 refugees, however, after a year of settlement it already housed more than 30,000. Within two years, Zaatari became the second largest refugee camp in the world and the largest in the region with over 100,000 refugees. It is now the largest "city" of Jordan, the closest to the Syrian border, with an area of 5.3 square kilometers. The Zaatari camp is jointly administered by the Jordanian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It has two hospitals with 55 beds, 9 health care centers and a delivery unit (with 30 births per week), 29 schools, mosques, 27 community centers offering psychosocial support and recreational activities, a structure similar to a market of 3,000 shops (in the so-called Avenue of the Champs Elysees) offering a wide range of foodstuffs, household items, clothes and other services. It is indisputable that it is particularly hard for the international organizations to handle complex situations like these beyond the immediate and basic needs of the refugees. But, in order to predict long-term trends, it would be of great importance to consider the structure of the social relations and the cultures of origin of the refugees before displacement. Excluding men from certain types of knowledge in the camp can respond perfectly to the concept that Westerners have of “empowerment”, linked to the presence of women in public spaces, in apical roles, usually prerogative of men only, while women, in order to reach them, have been subjected to support and rebalancing measures. Although affirmative actions -like quotas reserved to women only- have proved to work very well elsewhere, it is not certain that this perspective can be useful in cultural contexts in which – for example- sexual relations are particularly problematic, both in the public and in the private space, and the exercise of patriarchy is easily associated with the discrimination and violence of men against women within the family unit (Skaardal, 2016).

**The Difficulty of Focusing on Issues: Exporting Biases and Maintaining Problems**

Although greatly disputed (Abdi 2004), the image of women living in theaters of war as figures of madonnas in pain, always with children in their arms, completely apolitical and impersonal, is very common, and has a strong impact on how political responses to their needs are shaped by international institutions and organizations (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). As stated by Liisa Malkki, the visual importance of women and children as the embodiment of the concept of "refugee" has to do with the institutional and international expectation of a certain type of "impotence" as a typical feature of a refugee (Malkki 1996). Hajdukowski and Moussa also point out that, although it is now established that the experiences of forced transfer of women differ from those of men, such experiences are commonly reduced to the vulnerability of women with respect to the act of sexual violence, rather than exploring how and why they have been repeatedly persecuted and harassed before that specific moment, recognizing that displaced women could at the same time be victimized and remain active agents worthy of listening to, and not simply pity (Hajdukowski and Moussa 2008).

However, it is clear that the representation of the refugee women as extremely dependent and lacking agency is part of the reason that the patriarchal relations of power in refugee camps are maintained without any possibility of yielding: an example is given by the case of the many camps in Jordan, in the which the initial registration procedures are carried out by collecting only man’s data, considering them the natural "head of the family". As a result, even the most tiny piece of information about daily survival is delivered only to men, assuming that they then will inform women (WRC, 2014). Women who are in this way deleted from the entry records of the active population.

When the requests made by women in a camp concern the need for safe mobility to reach the most basic facilities, the answer would imply not only an immediate solution, but also a long-term reflection from the urban planning point of view. Due to the temporary permanence of the people in the camp, monitoring the implementation of policies overtime is not considered worthy. However, it would be rather interesting to verify whether the policies implemented may have a positive effect, even in a temporary settlement, because many of the dynamics of those places are the same of the “permanent” cities. Issues such as sexual and domestic violence are among the main concerns for the improvement of living conditions of the people in any type of widespread urban areas - from New York to Zaatari - in the short as well as on the long run (Action-Aid, 2017; Boccia, 2016). But the fact that most NGOs - even with the best intentions - consider women as victims with neither agency nor voice, does not help to address the problem (Freedman, 2015). In this perspective, the international organizations seem to miss the focus of the question: the integrity of the body, the respect for the human dignity and the right to live in a safe place are conditions that do not affect women only, but all people living in the camp (Cockburn, 2004). For this reason, the transitional period that all refugees spend in displacement should be transformed into that unique and unrepeatable moment in which women, as well as men, can gain as much as information as possible -an education that make them able to face inequalities that are not visible, hidden in the folds of tradition and of the certainty of certain behavioral patterns consolidated within of social sex relationships. Transitional situations can therefore offer great possibilities for those whose human rights have previously been denied. The problem is that, being the learning process a slow and subjective practice, it is less evident and less emphasized among the priorities of organizations that in a camp act in "emergency" conditions (Harrell-Bond, 1986).

On the other side, a higher level of female autonomy does not necessarily correspond to a level of gender equality in practical life: case studies conducted by the Agency for Development Cooperation and Research (ACORD) in Angola, Sudan and Somalia show that, although in those cases the conflict has expanded the economic roles of women by giving them greater autonomy, this has rarely led to greater political influence or a higher level of gender equality within society (Huser 2018 ).

According to Oxfam International, humanitarian responses often fail to consider the importance of women's roles and abilities as leaders in emergency response, with predominantly male leadership within the humanitarian organization itself (Oxfam, 2013). Similarly, a 2011 survey conducted among over 270 representatives of high and mid-level humanitarian agencies, demonstrated that 68% of the senior managers identified as males (Dara, 2011). Therefore, despite many useful international initiatives, for women, achieving a position of leadership in post-conflict transitions still depends on traditions that frame them in certain types of behaviors and roles, rooted in the culture not only of the countries for which the support policies are activated, but, above all, in the culture of the countries that carry the aids.

**Displacement as a Gendered Process**

According to Krause (2014), the word *refugee* can define both the condition of a person forcibly removed from their place of origin and forced to migrate on their own, and a person displaced in camps and settlements and supported by protection mechanisms. More specific is the definition given by Hans (2008), describing the removal from one's place of origin as a gendered process, since humanitarian crises have a decidedly different impact on women than men. People are in the fields because they have suddenly lost their homes, their education has been interrupted, their rights violated, they witnessed war and its consequences. When a conflict occurs, men, women and children are strongly exposed to traumas and psychological problems, not to mention the fact that in most places where a war takes place, access to primary services, facilities health and education is extremely limited, already long before the final displacement of people (Amnesty International Report, 2015).

These conditions have been present since the beginning in the Syrian crisis: in Jordan and in other neighboring countries, Syrian women and men live in tents or caravans inside or outside the camps -and in both cases with limited resources, impossibility of movement, in the condition of severe restriction (Niamh, 2013).

These are realities and problems that cannot be addressed nor understood using a neutral attitude. It is true that the academic and the political discourses on refugees and their identity shows a tendency towards homogenization, objectification and victimization of these subjects, but recent studies have strongly criticized this point of view (Rhen 2010). After the publication in 2008 of the Manual for the protection of women and girls, UNHCR argued that the transfer and settlement process in a host country could have a positive impact on people and, therefore, can be a reinforcement experience especially for women (UNHCR 2008). Since most refugees come from patriarchal societies and traditionalist communities, it is possible to hypothesize that this may be somehow true: camps can provide women with the opportunity to create or negotiate new and different gender roles and, as claimed Turner, forced displacement could break the main framework in which gender roles and relationships are attributed, which can be renegotiated to some extent and redefined during the time spent within the camp (Turner 2010).

Furthermore, while the theory says that displacement is to be considered a rapid and transitory phenomenon, experience shows that it is often a very long process. Globally, many generations have been displaced more than once and for significant periods of time: in 2012, almost 42% of all refugees worldwide were camped in 30 protracted refugee contexts with an estimated average duration of 20 years (UNHCR 2013). Therefore, the refugee camps are now moving from being defined as spaces of transition to a condition of semi-permanence, with characteristics increasingly closer to those of cities, in which hierarchies, power relations, habits and routines are established as in a true urban community.

For the Syrians, changes in lifestyle and mobility have necessitated a repositioning of identities and consequently a change in attitude and redistribution of power. A process that, of course, affects men, women and children in different ways and each of these situations shows different facets.

The case of women-headed households is, in this sense, interesting and delicate: on the one hand women in this condition contribute to a great change in the division of labor by creating new opportunities for the female part of the society, but on the other hand, in taking on roles considered socially and culturally "masculine", they find themselves marginalized within their own communities (El Feki et alii, 2017).

**Tearing Women Away from Family Violence**

As noted by Fiddian-Quasmiyeth (2014), in most cases the refugee camps are structured as places where political and power structures reinforce and accentuate the patriarchal tendencies of the original community rather than attenuate them. There is evidence that the general lack of security observed in most camps has, for example, increased the phenomenon of preventing girls from going to school (Care, 2013). Another phenomenon, linked to the lack of security in the camps, is the dramatic increase in marriages between minors: in 2014, UNICEF reported that the percentage of marriages between minor Syrian refugees in Jordan has increased from 12% in 2011 to 31.7% in the following three years, and during armed and displaced conflicts there are cases of parents who consented to the marriage of their daughters under the age of 18, justifying this agreement as a "protection from rape" (UNICEF, 2014).

In this scenario, and in order to reiterate how crucial it is to reflect on the planning of spaces within the camps, starting from the experiences of the women and men who live there, it is important to consider that the second areas of risk of physical violence and rape for women (after the house) are the camp's supply sites: most of the women living in refugee camps based in Jordan have reported receiving requests for sexual favors in exchange for humanitarian goods (Kernan, 2018); some were harassed while waiting in line for water and food for many hours under the sun. As a result, in some camps, special distribution lines have been created to separate men from women. However, the problem persists and it is aggravated in other ways by the distribution mechanism, since food provisions and food vouchers can generate feelings of stigma and humiliation and levels of frustration due to a lack of control over what and when one can access food (Davis and Taylor, 2013).

An ethnographic study on the experiences of prolonged displacement of Syrian refugee women and girls in northern Jordan found that many of them suffered enormous psychological pressure and were put under high levels of stress (Boswell and Al Akash, 2015). The partial lack of psychosocial support and counseling services for women refugee victims of violence is, as a matter of fact, one of the weakest points of the humanitarian intervention, since it is well known and documented that these services are scarce, although they represent one of the greatest need.

In 2013, it was reported that almost half of the women and girls displaced in Jordan rarely left home and many of them described their accommodations as a prison (Campos, 2018). This is due to many factors that also affect men, but what happened to women and girls is that they responded to harassment by changing their behavior, opting to remain imprisoned, progressively narrowing the space of their lives. While freedom of mobility was somehow already limited for many women and girls in Syria before the transfer, the increase in fear of sexual violence and harassment in the camps put further restrictions on them (UN Women, 2014). The limited possibilities of movement also affect the possibilities for women and girls to reach goods and services, and consequently it is less likely for them to take part in social and economic activities and attain a good level of education. The lack of education for women will, on the long run, have a huge effect on future Syrian society, increasing poverty and vulnerability cycles (Rosenberg, 2016). Investing and supporting access to education and developing new skills for Syrian women and adolescents (both married and unmarried) can be one of the most effective long-term solutions to reduce their isolation and economic difficulties and improve their physical and psychological well-being.

Research has already illustrated that urban structures are part of the problem of segregation and of the violence women suffer, reinforcing cultural behaviors that should be eliminated, instead of being weakened. For this reason, all refugees, women and men together, should be involved at least in the process of recognizing these problems, because these are complex issues, not only social, not only relevant to security, not just a matter of urban planning, but involving all these things together. So considering violence not only within the framework of security as a repression of crime, but by extending the analysis to the entire social and urban environment in which it can happen (inside and outside the home, in the domestic environment and therefore known or elsewhere), and consequently changing people's living conditions. Therefore, the tools of gender-sensitive urban planning could be extremely useful, becoming part of the solution to the problem.

In relation to this, in the last twenty years new approaches to "community planning" have emerged, with the aim of identifying people’s needs through dialogue and interacion, and this perspective can be very interesting in the case of a refugee camp. Today, a more complex and close link between planning and housing seems increasingly necessary, improving the collective well-being, but it is also necessary to understand the main issues that the urban environment is proposing to politics - in terms of urban decisions, in terms of funding, just to give simple examples - and the processes of planning and living - seem to find in the narrative dimension an area of dialogue and positive interaction.

So as the urbanists point out, over the last few years the concept of planning has assumed the meaning of an "urban conversation", of an "agreement-oriented interactive system" (Vettoretto, 2009; Crosta, 2010), and in this new perspective, the subjective and biographical dimension of the individuals appears to be decisive (Coppe- Cremaschi 1994; Cremaschi, 2009), in order to establish a connection between the dimension of everyday life and the more concrete dimension of urban intervention processes (Beauregard, 1994, 1995; Healey, 1992). On the other hand, the concept of housing is slowly leaving the simple meaning of "having a home", returning to take possession of its complex sphere of meanings, which includes many relational dimensions – the reproduction sphere, the care of the dependent people, the care of places where we live (Pulcini, 2010; Del Re, 2014). It is precisely here, in connecting planning and housing, that the contribution of women's experience appears to be substantial: listen to their voice and taking into account their daily experience in coping with family duties, expectations, cultural frames and needs, can be a repository of important suggestions for the urbanists, suggestions coming from the direct experiences of the places that women compulsory have.

In view of the fact that camps are not only temporary shelters, but semi-permanent urban settlements, capable of accommodating the distraught and violated lives of people fleeing from places that they will unlikely see again, it is particularly important to take this type of vision into account, linking the construction of places with the lives and needs of the people and reinforcing it with a strong capacity of the planner to lissen and riealaborate those stories into “urban solutions” (Vettoretto, 2009). Not only the urgency of "saving life" is therefore required for those who operate in the camp, but also the attitude of "care", especially when the emergency is over and a difficult and painful "normality" must be managed for an indefinite time.

As a journalist of the New York Times wrote a few years ago, the possibility to define a camp as "provisional" and therefore avoiding to build adequate infrastructures, limit oneself to a dimension of material survival. But organic development, inevitably guided by the articulation of the lives of the people who they pass through it, it is unstoppable, and if you encourage it in the right way or fight it, in any case it will happen anyway (Kimmelmann 2014). Nothing is really temporary in a refugee camp. Perhaps people individually are - they can come and go, live or die - but the structures, buildings remain: why not yield the potential of such a place then?

**In the city of Zaatari: organizing the daily life of women**

There are three main reasons to consider the Zaatari camp as interesting and therefore to dedicate part of this research to the lives of refugee women in that field: the first is that it is unquestionably the largest host settlement in the Middle East region; the second is that most of the refugees living there come from the same Syrian region, sharing the same historical, cultural and social background. Taking these issues into consideration, analyzing Zaatari can provide some interesting insights, with respect to the themes mentioned above, namely the impact of displacement, the development of coping mechanisms and the possibility that this new situation will be transformed into the life of the women and not just theirs.

After the first anti-government demonstrations in March 2011 in the city of Dara'a, large numbers of Syrian refugees fled elsewhere to find security. For many of them this place was just across the border, in Jordan. Consequently, in July 2012, the UN opened three reception camps in that area. (Latta, 2018). According to an evaluation report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2015), Syrian refugees registered in Jordan represent about 10% of the total population of the country. The working and agricultural communities that surround the Syrian city of Dara'a, from which most Syrians come, were traditional and mainly composed of large families, providing women with a strong sense of identity and belonging. The clear delineation of the private and public spheres, and particular conceptualizations and delineations of behavior between the sexes, were strongly rooted and intrinsic in the practice of the daily existence of these populations (Manhood, 2005).

Only 30 km of agricultural land separates Jordan's second largest city, Irbid, from Dara’a. Both cities are located on the plain of Hauran, once one of the most fertile regions of Syria. After the creation of a physical border between Syria and Jordan, following the First World War, trade, marriages and the movement between the two populations remained active and therefore when the current conflict started, many Syrians spontaneously moved to Jordan to reunite with relatives, not as refugees, but as visitors. Perhaps without the common historical-cultural connection, northern Jordan, would not have had so many people in peace in these years, bearing in mind the challenges that this situation posed to the country: the most obvious is that Syrian refugees compete with the people of Jordan for limited resources such as water, job opportunities, health care, housing and education (Francis, 2015).

An interesting fact, for the purposes of this research, is that, according to the latest UNHCR report, women represent 54% of the total population of the Zaatari camp with 42% of women-led families (UNHCR, 2018). In an attempt to organize the camp as a real city, Zaatari is divided into 12 districts, with appointed representatives for each district. Leadership in the field remains a problem, as does the fact that districts one and two, the oldest part of the camp, not only represent the most populous part of the settlement, but benefit from close access to primary services, such as schools and hospitals. UNHCR is trying as much as possible to keep existing communities together, encouraging the grouping of people from the same area, as an attempt to promote a sense of belonging within each district of the camp (Lived Project, 2017), but the continuous expansion of the settlement area makes things difficult and problematic.

The expansion and organization of the camp has undoubtedly been useful and positive for many refugees, with the implementation of a lively informal market, which includes a taxi system, many commercial roads with more than 3,000 informal shops and companies and other services of any kind. However, as in all urban settlements, even in Zaatari strong socio-economic inequalities are observed even after a short time, with a growing gap between those whose economic situation has improved thanks to the renewed economic system of the camp and those who are still highly dependent from international aid.

The point is that, in contrast to the host communities, participation in paid work within the camp is extremely limited especially for women: less than 5-10%. Only a minority of refugee women have been involved in the production of food at home in the camp because, unlike what happens in the cities of Jordan, preparing and serving food is considered in the Syrian community a job qualified for men and not culturally acceptable for women. In recent years, the field has been in the international spotlight for the miserable condition of its homes, for the unhygienic conditions of roads and public and private services, for limited access to water, for crowded schools and increasing sexual crimes uncontrolled. Moreover, most of the refugees still live in tents after years and years, daily dealing with the lack of heating or air conditioning to withstand the varying temperatures of the desert and the constant winds that raise waves of sand. Currently, things seem to have improved and the latest reports show a good availability of caravans instead of tents, located according to the "vulnerability criteria" established by UNHCR, also considering that women head of families, single women and families with children are adequately protected in this planning (UNHCR, 2014).

Another grim problem is that, although this field was initially seen as a safe place, violence has rapidly and inevitably spread (UNHCR, 2016). According to UNICEF, the two main problems of Zaatari are on the one hand the cases of sexual violence recorded and on the other the consequences that the fear of being raped, both inside and outside the home, has for women. series of problems, as seen above

Several humanitarian organizations and United Nations agencies are working to provide psychological counseling programs, training courses and clinical care adapted to victims of violence. However, the services and professional staff are not yet sufficient to cope with the problem and, more seriously, even little that exists, it remains almost unknown to refugee women.

In 2013, the journalist Rania Abouzeid after visiting the camp, wrote a very effective article, in which Zaatari is described as a sprawling maze of tents and caravans, covered in dust, dirty with dense sand, and in which the parts most old in the camp, the closest to the entrance, are generally safer while the peripheral areas are left to themselves. Regarding the organization of the camp, the journalist observes, there are established communities, often organized around clans or villages, which offer security in terms of welcoming and family environments. In the newer parts of the camp, however, caravans and tents are more spaced, people often do not know each other, and a night ride to the communal bathrooms, for example, becomes a real "palpitating journey" (Abouzeid, 2013).

In regards to access to public space, Abouzeid points out that the current system, in which non-governmental organizations mainly deal with the establishment of trusted figures identified by the refugees themselves (the "street leaders" are called) was largely a failure: many of these leaders, in their entirety men, end up being scorned or feared by other refugees; they exploited their positions of relative power to benefit themselves, taking a greater share of the aid that is distributed, employing friends and relatives in jobs around the camp, or using violence to extort money and suppress potential rivals (Abouzeid, 2013 ). Perhaps a foreseeable end, if we haven't studied in depth what it means leaderhip in that culture, how it manifests itself, what it means to establish leaders, how they intend to carry out their role, how the chain of responsibilities and command is organized among men in this community.

**Beyond immediate needs: the importance of the economic independence**

What many international organizations usually ignore is that there have been profound and radical changes in the behavior of Syrian women in recent years, both as refugees, as residents in areas controlled by the regime, or under the control of armed or Kurdish Islamist factions. In all these areas, reports the journalist, women have started their revolution against many traditional values and social models that control and limit their freedom. There are many ways to challenge authority, and every woman fights from her position and in its own way (Eidmouni, 2017). Creating and investing in spaces and programs for women capable of going beyond immediate needs, requires a profound re-orientation of our western vision of women as the main victims of the humanitarian crisis and conflicts and commits us to dealing with people who had to re-invent a reason for living and a personal identity. Due to this forced condition of "survivors" they are now able to transform not only the places in which they are housed, but also to imagine with a sense of reality their future lives, in post-conflict Syria. The point is to listen to their needs and not imagine that they necessarily need knowledge that fit our concept of empowerment but not theirs, or at least not in a form that they can then utilize in their real life. It is not that refugee women are unable or unwilling to participate in public arenas, explains Eidmouni, the point is to recognize the barriers that prevent them from choosing to do so. For empowerment to take place, the transition from the concept of woman as a victim and as part of a "vulnerable group" that needs "safe" oases to inhabit, to women and girls as agents of their own social change, is strongly necessary. They are much more than mouths to feed and bodies to care for, writes the Syrian activist, and the recognition of their humanity, creativity and resilience is also required in difficult situations and times (Eidmouni, 2017); particularly in precarious living conditions as happens to those who are refugees (Women Refugees Commission, 2014).

It is essential to amplify the voices and experiences of refugee women and link them to political spaces, thus combining the basis, civil society, with the tops of decision trees. The entry point to empowerment can be different for each refugee woman and community involvement strategies should go through a deep understanding of the potential that every woman necessarily has, starting from the knowledge of housing strategies and "bricolage practices" for overcome both immediate and long-term needs, due to the place that history has always reserved for them, in a patriarchal society, forcing them to experiment and creatively organize private space and domesticity, the neighborhood and short-distance movements. This is a fact that concerns the past as well as the present. It is a fact that history has produced, a knowledge that is not innate, but one of experience. This knowledge may be useful, it should not be eliminated in the struggle for "empowerment" by imagining that it is always something other than what is already known. A process of re-orientation and enhancement of knowledge that should necessarily also concern men to produce lasting, transformative results of patriarchal mentalities and cultures.

The special and established knowledge of women and men can usefully be turned into an interesting and available resource in terms of ideas and tools to improve the condition of daily life of all people in a "temporary city" like a refugee camp, but this also applies to all other urban contexts. Involving women and men with their knowledge in urban processes, and using their experiences in favor of the whole community is the crux of the matter (Alrahabi, 2018).

**In the city of Zaatari: a conclusion**

Perhaps it is not possible to transform a tent or a caravan into a home, with all that this word carries with itself, but after more than eight years, people at Zaatari are in the position of having to take this step: normality, in one way or another, it has taken hold, it has this face, because, once the initial moment has passed, the disorientation turns into a new type of orientation that if not demolished by violence and fear, can create new belonging to a place, and this happens when the superfluous returns to have a value - not only do the tents or caravans become important, but it becomes important that for the roads there are the fountains, the gardens, the signs, the plants.

The "urban camps" like Zaatari, are not only places where women and men, boys and girls, pieces of the community, shreds of families "frozen" in their tradition, ready habits and rituals, are "stored" more or less temporarily in custody any time, to return to their home country as soon as the war ends, to resume their old life. Yet, this is not the way reality functions. After years of conflict, destruction and absence, returning home could mean realizing that what has been lost forever has been made unrecognizable (Brillenburg, Klompner, Kalagas, 2017).

Displacement camps, border settlements, informal transit camps, planned camps, reception centers and all post-conflict solutions that have been used should definitely keeping the inhabitants in a perennial state of insecurity and poverty, always on the verge of change, displacement and uncertainty.

Like any other urban settlement, refugee camps have a symbolic value compared to the reconstruction of a society torn by conflict as well as by a natural catastrophe or by the two things together, a value that can be increased when refugees - women and men - are considered part of the project, when they can participate not only in the construction of their "houses", but also in the "political", in the economic and social life around them. In this sense, the fields should be understood as places where it is easier to experiment with new relationships and it is possible to overcome most of the patriarchal relationships by building real and ideal spaces that are shared and the fruit of mutual respect, a fundamental basis for a real and lasting democracy.

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1. The list of the violations that have taken place during the Syrian conflict among and toward the population are listed in the Human Rights Council’ s report published in September 2019 as a result of a field operation conducted by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. For further information and news about the infringement of humanitarian and human rights law within the conflict the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights’ site <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?m=201501>can be consulted. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Data retrieved on 31st of October 2019 from the Operational Portal of the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria.](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, once Syrian refugees settled in Lebanon, there was appreciation for help received but such assistance was also perceived to have an emasculating effect. In the International Men and Gender Equality Survey- IMAGES- (El Feki et alii, 2017) in the Middle East and North Africa 2107, several Syrian refugees reported in interviews that the humanitarian assistance they received was a further complicating factor in household dynamics and the question of who is the provider in the home. Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon rely on relief aid for food, shelter, and clothing, particularly as registered refugees are not allowed to be officially employed. Women are often the beneficiaries of this aid, because of their real vulnerabilities but also because many men think that, as men, it would be shameful for them to ask for assistance. This role reversal seems to have contributed to men feeling emasculated. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)